

Ever have that nightmare where you're supposed to give a big speech or presentation and you have absolutely nothing ready? Or maybe the one where you have to take a big test? Or maybe it wasn't a nightmare. Maybe you can just remember the last time you had to face something with a lot of unknowns. How much was going to depend on you? Would you be up to it? What would happen to you if you couldn't do it? Humiliation? Embarrassment? Worse?

The unknown can be scary. Or what we do know but don't feel ready for can be just as scary. The uncertainty can unnerve us, and when we consider the Advent of our King, we can be tempted to fall into the same kind of trap. So much of Jesus' return comes to us in terms that could scare us: Loud. Destruction. Fire. Judgment. And that's just the words Jesus himself uses. That's not even calling into account some of the downright terrifying imagery that Revelation contains. Looking at only these things, without any context or further information, we would have every right to be afraid of the unknowns that our God's second coming is going to bring.

But our God does not want you to be afraid of that day.

And so to prepare us, to give us the full truth we need know to face that day, God sends messengers. He places people in our lives who speak this message to us. He's done this for a very long time. Today our reading comes from one of those messengers; the prophet Isaiah. He spoke to the people of Israel as God's mouthpiece for a very long time. In the section we look at today, he uniquely identifies another messenger yet to come. This man we would come to know as John the Baptist.

But as interesting as the ties between the two are, between them there was a long string of those that God had bring his word to his people, and long since John there have been those that continue to bring the same message that Isaiah wrote and the same message that John preached and Jesus completed and the same basic message that you continue to hear in this building time and again. The messengers that God has appointed today have the same message that Isaiah had and even those before and long after him. It's the message that I myself have been called to share and it's the message that you also have the privilege of sharing in the spread of. Anyone who speaks God's word to those who need to hear it form part of this great chain of messengers. And at the same time, we are also all those who need to hear what these messengers appointed by God have to say.

And like Isaiah speaks of here, like the entire point of John's ministry, like we continue to do today, the first part of this message, the first step in preparing for the return of God is to make straight paths in the wilderness. Not literally, of course. But the idea is the same. The king, our hero, our mighty God is approaching and we want him to be here. We need him to be here. And so we should do everything possible to make his approach as easy and uncomplicated as it can be. And to do that, we have to level out the mountains and the valleys that would slow him down. We have to clear out the wildlife and vegetation that would prevent his journey.

So what is that? Well, our God is coming to help us, to tell us how he will rescue us and help us if we will just let him. What could possibly get in the way of that? Rationally, you would think, probably nothing. But maybe you forget the words of the five-year-old struggling to accomplish some impossible task, "I don't NEED help!" There's plenty that gets in the way of our God's path to us, not the least of which is pride. Pride says that I am a good and strong person. I do not need God's help, or anyone's help. I may take some, from time to time, at my own inclination, but I could get by without any help if I need to. I am strong and independent. I will find my own way and take care of myself thank you very much.

And tagging right along with the mountain of pride is the valley of selfishness. Because if I take this "God" guy in, he's just going to want want want from me and I'll never get any of the stuff I want. I don't want to give up my ways, I don't want to let go of what I enjoy doing. I clearly don't really need him so why should I give him any of the stuff he wants from me. I'll just keep what I have for myself thank you very much. God can go find his own.

And on and on the obstacles go. The pride and the greed are joined by selfish objections, human reasoning that throws itself in front of God's wisdom like it could somehow compete. And on and on, more and more obstacles are standing in the way. How will the Lord ever make it through that mess to anyone's heart? How will anyone be saved?

This is the purpose of the messengers God sends ahead of himself. The wilderness grows in the heart. The messenger comes to level the land and build a straight highway. How? With a message of death. How well the terrain is leveled depends on how seriously you take this message of death. All men are like grass, all their glory is like the flower of the field. Shocking to hear the strength we think we have, the power of our lives compared to nothing but grass. And flowers can be pretty, to some more beautiful than all the splendor man has tried to build for himself. But

how long does that last? A few months at most and then gone. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them.

You are grass before the Lord. You cannot stand before him. His very breath is enough to wither and destroy you. What reason have you ever given God to love you? What reason have you ever given him to treat you with any sort of kindness or mercy? Especially you, who know the lengths he's gone to for you and you still snub him every day. You have chance after chance to serve him in your life, time after time to make a decision that says, "God you're worth more to me than...this." Extra sleep, extra free time, lower stress, more money, day in and day out we choose ourselves over our God. We are grass before the Lord and when his breath blows on us we deserve to wither and die.

Pride can't stand before that. You can fool yourself by daydreaming, but if you look at what God demands and what you can do, there isn't an ounce of yourself to be proud of. There isn't an iota of anything you can do to stop God's anger and wrath when it comes for what you've done. Ingrate. Look at God's law, compare it to your life and watch those mountains of pride be levelled.

After pride falls comes the desperation of trying to bargain with God. We even try to do this with the little things after our own meager strength and intelligence has failed. God if you help me I'll be good. God if you help me I'll give up this. But what are you offering God? Either things that aren't yours, things you don't have or things you should be doing anyway. You have nothing of value to give God. You have nothing he needs. Everything you chase after in this life will come to nothing. It won't spare you the fate you deserve. And what's worse, none of it was yours to begin with. Everything you have is only because God gave it to you. Every ability and strength is a gift from him and look at how you've squandered it. You waste your short time here pursuing such pointless gains. Everything you chase after only takes you further from God and accomplishes nothing. You have nothing without him. Consider your absolute poverty without God and let the valleys of selfishness be filled in.

One by one, as we listen to the voice of God instead of our own inane prattling, every objection is silenced. Every mouth is shut. And we realize that we are naked and helpless before our God. We are entirely without excuse. Mankind was created with dust and the breath of God. Take back what God gave us and we are only dust again.

The better we are convinced of this message, the more we truly understand it, the better off we are. The more we know the truth of this message of death, the more level and straight the path into our heart is and the better our lives in Christ become.

Because only when we are utterly broken, only when we have given up every last shred of hope in our own abilities, only then can God truly heal us. Shattered and bleeding, crying and hopeless, our Lord Christ comes to us with the second message, the one the first messengers prepared us to hear. Christ looks at us and says, "I know what you are. I know the crimes you have committed. I know how vile and lazy and disgusting your thoughts are. I know you, through and through, better than you even know yourself.

"And I love you."

"I have taken it upon myself, by my own choosing, to be what you are not. I lived the life you should have lived. I lived for the Lord God at all times. I kept my neighbor in my heart at all times. I was never selfish or prideful or arrogant. And then I stood before the breath of the Lord and withered under it. I bore his wrath for your faults. I died so that you can live."

This is the message that brings life to us. Eternal life, confirmed when that last trumpet sounds. We cannot have it, we cannot appreciate it, until we are first broken by the law. This Savior was not the kind of deliverance that the Jews once expected, and so John the Baptist was sent to prepare the people. Today, people still put too much faith in themselves and all the wrong things that cannot help. And so God still sends messengers ahead to speak his law and break down every objection there can be. And once the mountains are levelled and the valleys filled in and every shrub cleared and there is no hope left in the self except death, then the Savior can arrive and march triumphantly into that hurting heart and heal. He arrives and brings life.

This is the message you have. You are prepared. God has prepared you. And he continues to keep you prepared. He gives us messengers and his very word to refresh us every day with these two basic truths. You are not good enough, you deserve death. But God loves you, and he has brought you life. John the Baptist prepared the people for the coming Savior. God's messengers prepared your heart so Christ could enter. And even now he uses his word to keep you prepared for that great day when Christ will come again.

By the blood of Christ, given freely by grace and mercy, you are ready. It's not what you deserve, but it's what God wants. Don't be afraid of that great and awesome day. In Christ, you are prepared. With Christ that day will be the start of eternal joy. Amen.